by Kevin Savetz

MusicMatch Jukebox 7.0

MusicMatch Jukebox 7.0
$19.99
MusicMatch
www.musicmatch.com

Using MusicMatch Jukebox 7.0 is a little like voting for Ralph Nader. It seems like a pretty good idea, but in reality, it's fraught with some problems. The MusicMatch Jukebox software lets you listen to CDs, rip and listen to MP3s, burn audio CDs, and tune in to Internet radio stations. But some basic functions simply don't work very well.

There are two versions of the program. The free version offers basic playing, ripping, and burning. The $19.99 registered version adds equalizer functions, CD label printing, and support for digital audio effects.

Jukebox can rip from CDs or grab audio from your PC's line-in port, converting your music to MP3, WAV, or Windows Media formats. On our test system, the program's MP3 ripper was agonizingly slow, taking twice as long to rip a song as to simply play it.

Even after you pony up 20 bucks for the software, you sometimes feel as though the company is always begging for more. For example, the software is compatible with sound-enhancement plug-ins, but it doesn't come with any. You can, however, buy an effects plug-in for another $19.99.

Jukebox plays Internet radio stations, but it'll constantly badger you to subscribe to the Radio MX service for $4.95 a month or $39.95 a year. The service is cool, offering stutter-free MP3s and customized playlists, but oh, the nagging. You can listen to free streaming radio stations, too, and there's a built-in program guide. However, most of these free stations wouldn't play on our test system, serving up an obtuse error message instead. The support team provided a fix involving a trip into the Registry Editor that solved the problem.

Jukebox serves up other features, including skins, visualizations, and the ability to print CD labels, but these are just icing on a bland cake.

Nullsoft Winamp 2.78

Winamp 2.78
Free
Nullsoft
www.winamp.com

If you need a program to listen to digital music with, you don't need to look any further than Winamp 2.78. The program is a snazzy player that delivers you tunes from your audio CDs, MP3s, and online streaming radio stations. Winamp is strictly an audio player, though; it won't give you the ability to rip MP3s or burn audio CDs.

Nullsoft serves up Winamp in three free versions. The no-frills Lite version of the program plays MP3s and Internet streaming stations. The Standard version adds support for visualizations to accompany the music playing, and the Full version adds support for Windows Media Audio. These choices let you balance features with bulk: The Lite version weighs in at 500KB, while the Full version is just less than 2MB in size.

The program is sleek and efficient; it doesn't waste screen real estate, although some people might argue the interface is too compact and the buttons too small. If your eyes aren't what they used to be, you can double the size of the main display windows. If you'd rather not deal with Winamp's interface at all, you can still access the most important functions from the System Tray.

Winamp also includes a minibrowser, which essentially amounts to a simple Web browser. The minibrowser can automatically show you links embedded in MP3 files and ShoutCast streams, which is an interesting way to get more information about the artists you are listening to. You will also use the minibrowser to tune into streaming Internet radio stations. The browser takes you to Nullsoft's free Shoutcast.com streaming audio system, which is one of the more comprehensive directories of streaming radio stations around.

No audio player would really be complete without a few goofy features to tinker with, and Winamp has its share. These include various skins, visualizations, and support for sound-manipulation plug-ins. You can choose from a ton of skins and plug-ins from the archive available at the Winamp Web site.

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect